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THE  
BOOK OF REVELATION  
ITS PURPOSE AND STRUCTURE

BY

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NEW YORK

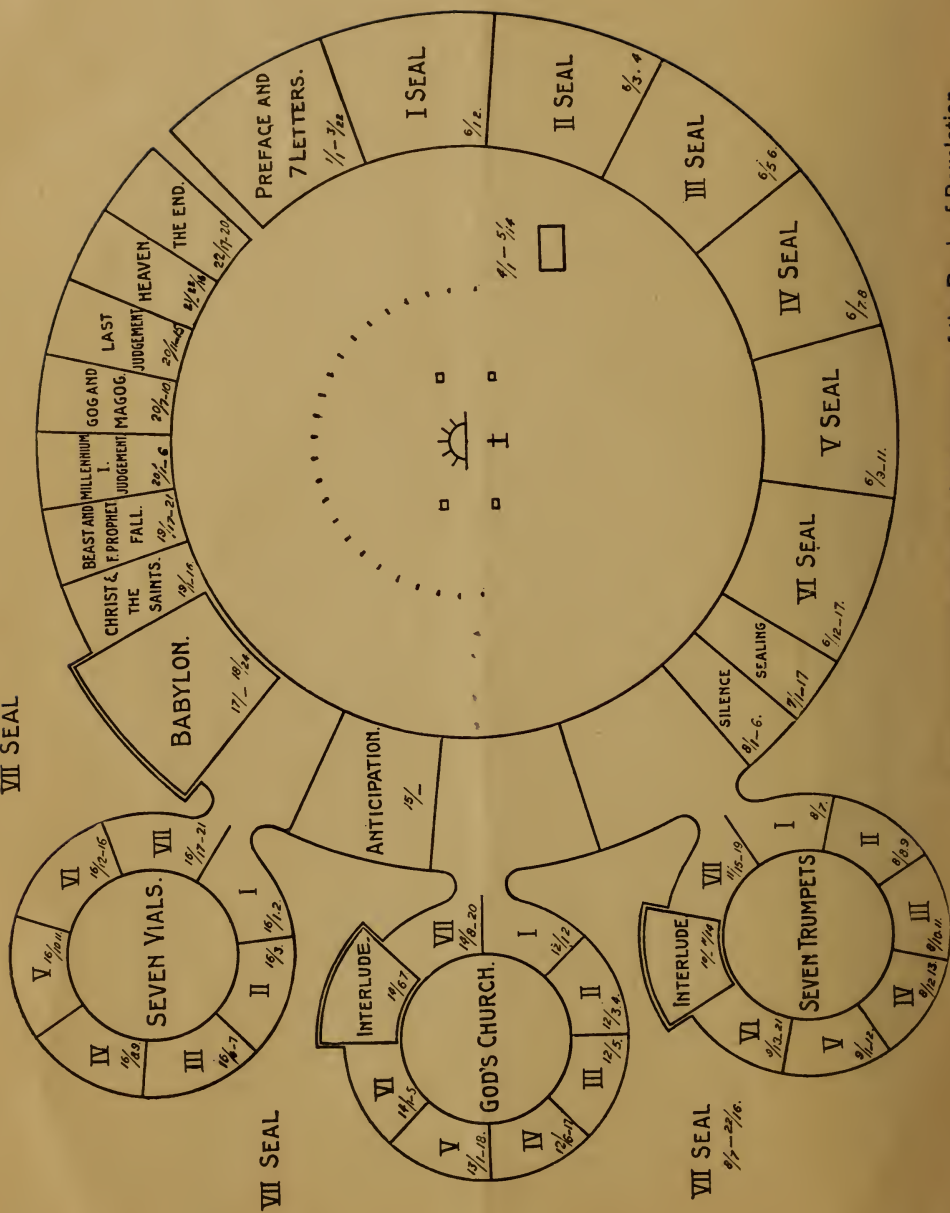
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1892

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VII SEAL



Pictorial Analysis showing the structure of the Book of Revelation.

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# THE BOOK OF REVELATION.

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EIGHTEEN centuries have passed since, by divine inspiration, that book was written which is placed as the last in the canon of Holy Scripture. Since then it has been translated into eighty-four languages; it is, with the other books of the Bible, in the homes of millions of people; it has been expounded and commented upon by innumerable exegetes. Yet the marvelous fact remains that it is the most obscure, most neglected, most misunderstood and misrepresented of all books, secular or divine, of equal circulation. The opinion has spread all over Christendom that this book cannot be understood, that some man by the name of John wrote it, that it contains a series of fanciful and incoherent pictures or dreams. A great many people cannot see how the book ever got into the Bible at all.

It is not to be denied that there are one or two minor points in its text which are not as clear as others, but to say, therefore, that the whole book cannot be understood, that there is no comfort for the humble and simple-minded Christian to be derived from it, is going altogether too far. A simple exposition, taking in the whole range of the book, especially showing the connections between the different parts of the heavenly vision, may be helpful in clearing away some of these misapprehensions or preoccupations.

We often forget that the books of the New Testament are largely epistles written to single persons or churches. We are therefore liable to overlook the condition of the writer, his purpose in writing, the time and position of the parties addressed. But these are most important questions, and a careful inspection regarding them is of great bearing upon the interpretation of this book. The author makes himself known to us first as "John to the seven churches which are in Asia;" then as "I, John, who also am your brother and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos." Who else but John the apostle could



have written the first short statement? Who was John of Asia Minor? If it had been another but the apostle, as, for instance, John the Presbyter, as has been suggested, would he likely have omitted to make himself more fully known than he did? We think not. Tradition, moreover, always held that St. John was exiled to Patmos. That agrees with the second statement. Further, there is one internal evidence which would have suggested to us the author of the Gospel according to St. John as the author of this letter, had we even no name attached to the book at all. In Rev. xix, 13, while the writer views the victorious Lord clothed with the garments of redemption, he calls him "The Word of God." Who else but the writer of "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" is likely to call his Lord by that name? And now the occasion of the letter. St. John was banished to Patmos for the faithful preaching of the Gospel. The churches were under persecution—it matters little whether under Nero or Domitian. Christianity was in great danger. What will become of it? is the question of the Church. Is it unnatural to suppose that he who had lain on the bosom of the Lord, who had seen him ascending into heaven, who was then, perhaps, the only survivor of the apostles, would commune with his Lord in earnest prayer, asking, pleading, entreating to be shown somehow in what manner all this strife would end? The immediate occasion of this letter, therefore, was persecution, exile, and prayer for sustaining grace. And the prayer was answered. Not only did St. John derive comfort from the answer, but he was commanded to write all he saw to the churches among which he had labored with so great devotion. And as the Christians in Asia, when they received this letter, must have rejoiced and taken comfort, so may we, for in many respects are we to-day in the same position as were our brethren in those churches.

Many have been the attempts to interpret the book on an historic basis, but one reflection alone, we think, will suffice to show the fallacy of such a proceeding. We turn to Dr. Adam Clarke. He seems to get on well at the outset, but soon becomes exceedingly fanciful. He sees in every flying eagle an historic person, in every trumpet sound an actual occurrence. This leads him to make the seven heads in Rev. xvii, 9, the "seven electorates of the German Empire," and an angel flying through the heavens becomes "the British and Foreign Bible Society," and the like. But, we ask, does it stand to reason that our Lord, when he wants to speak peace to the troubled hearts in Patmos,

Ephesus, or Smyrna, in the year A. D. 96, would send them a message which they could not understand or about which they could not even conjecture? The book must have been, and undoubtedly was, plain to the first readers. We must find a corresponding interpretation, and only from such can we derive any comfort at present.

In the following treatment we purposely omit all details, and confine ourselves simply to the action of the book.

The first chapter contains the statement of St. John's position and the command to write down in a circular letter to his churches in Asia Minor the vision which he was about to receive. The second and third chapters are filled with personal addresses to the pastors of the aforementioned churches. In these they are recommended for the good that is in them, rebuked for their sins, upheld by a promise, and exhorted to immediate repentance and perseverance.

With the fourth chapter begins the second part of the vision, the great and beautiful series of pictures given to impart encouragement to the Church in all ages. First, we are introduced to the main figures in the heavenly abode, seeing them as in a beautiful panorama. In the center is a throne, and on it sits the Deity in such a splendor as to shine like "a jasper and a sardine stone." As in a Jewish court, so here a number of elders surround the throne; yet they are not any more in the attire of Judaism, but in the robes of the redeemed—the patriarchs of old and the apostles of Christ all saved by the same Jesus. At the four corners of the platform upon which the throne is elevated we see the four cherubs, the representatives of God's natural forces, with faces symbolizing strength, steady workmanship, intelligence, and swift execution. Ever watchful, with eyes all about them, they are ready to obey their Lord at his bidding. John looks closer and sees in the divine hand a book. This scroll contained what he had asked for, the record of the Church of God. How his heart must have been beating, his joy have been elevated! He was to see it. What would it be? But nearest joy lies often discouragement. No one is found worthy to open the record; no, not one, in heaven or earth or hades. But who is this? Not long did John ask that question, for presently he sees clearly the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Christ steps forward, takes the roll, which is perfectly sealed with seven seals, and begins to open one wax after the other. John understood the meaning of this symbolical process. At the breaking of each seal he would see another step toward the end, until, after the opening of the last, the whole future would lie plainly before him. Let us follow him,

then, as he receives his revelation. The first seal falls. A white horse passes the stage of his vision. Did John not know what that meant? Of course he did. White is the color of victory. Thank God for that blessed assurance! The second seal is broken, and we learn that it will not be an easy victory; blood must flow and slaughter be endured, for red is the color of this horse. Still darker turn the shades of the picture, for famine and all manner of death do follow, as we plainly see from the color of the horses which appear after the opening of the third and fourth seals. And now a picture very different from the preceding presents itself as the fifth seal breaks. The redeemed who look upon the struggle give utterance to their impatience. "How long," do they cry, "how long must this go on?" But God's mercy is much broader than the patience of the saints. His time has not yet come. "Wait," resounds the answer, "wait and murmur not." With this the next seal falls, and still more convulsions and revolutions are brought to our vision. Soon we are to see the end; our expectation is very great, but there is a significant interlude before we are permitted to see the seventh seal opened. God marks for himself all those of all ages and of every nation who have been true to him, so that they will be recognized and spared at the final consummation. And now the last seal is removed. Nothing stirs. Another minute passes by. Nothing new appears. O, what hours must those next thirty minutes have been to John, as he waited, waited, waited, for "there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour!" Presently the picture changes. Seven angels are seen, and trumpets are given to them which they blow in turn. And, as they sound, pictures of destruction develop resembling the plagues brought upon Egypt in the times of Moses. Some seem to strike nature, others men; John understood it all. The times of war and pestilence, persecution and opposition to Christianity, were not to come in one single cycle of events; they had to be repeated; they would not come once, but again and again. And between the sounds of the sixth and seventh trumpets we meet again with some interludes. They are apparently laid in to bring into prominence some minor points which possibly might have escaped John's or our attention. The blast of the final trumpet has gone forth and we are ready to see the action progress, prepared to gaze at the features peculiar to the last events of time. Yet we are detained again. The chapters xii and xiii give us, in an independent side circle, a view of God's Church of the past, and even some anticipatory glimpses of the end. The seven distinctive pictures are as follows:



1. The Mother ; or, the Jewish Church.
2. The Dragon ; or, Satan the Adversary.
3. The Child ; or, the Christian Church.
4. Michael Fights ; or, Satan Cast out of Heaven.
5. Two Beasts ; or, the Temporal and the Spiritual Antichristian Powers.
6. Mount Zion ; or, the Saints on Safe Ground.
7. Babylon's Fall ; or, the Wickedness of the World Destroyed.

Between the sixth and seventh pictures we have a small side view assuring us that the Gospel never ceases to be preached. But we must for a moment tarry at the fifth picture in this cycle, to correct one common and serious mistake. The current opinion is that the thirteenth chapter is a proclamation against Rome. This is true only in a very limited sense. The picture shows us no doubt the Romish temporal, and the Romish heathen, sacerdotal powers ; but, mark you, only as a type of any worldly temporal and heathen force. This is a law in prophecy everywhere. The doom was sure as to Rome, of course, but it is just as sure as to Buddhism and Brahminism of to-day. These predictions, or visions, point to Rome as a type in the same manner as Babylon here means not that veritable city—for that had fallen long ago—but the cause for which it stands, that is, wickedness. So we are still anxious to see the end, but must wait until we have once more learned the lesson of repetition, when we see the seven vials poured out upon the world, and until we have further gazed upon a thorough explanation of the figure of Babylon used in the preceding chapters.

Seven distinct pictures disclose to us the consummation. The first is a picture of peace. Would to God that those in our days, who always cry that the Church is falling to pieces, could see this with us. Christ stands on the holy ground of Mount Zion, surrounded by an innumerable multitude of worshipping saints who, with the elders, are jubilant in praise and adoration. That does not look like defeat. No ! We take courage, though yet in bonds here below, and we will press on to meet those who await us yonder. O, for a brush to paint the next scene ! The progressing Redeemer rides upon his white horse against the beast—the false temporal powers of this world—and the false prophet—the false religions—and as he draws his sword, victory is with him. His enemies are taken captive and thrown into the bottomless pit, to be powerless forever and ever. But one is still alive—

Satan, "that old serpent." What of him? Bound with unbreakable chains, he is cast into the same prison until, in God's providence, and for a short time only, he must be loosed again. In the meantime the martyrs are permitted a special privilege. They are judged, and enjoy with Christ the long period of his undisturbed reign. And well may St. John exclaim, "Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection." Satan's last chance comes. He is once more freed to deceive the people, and O, how sad is the result! Were they not all true to Jesus? Nay, for the human heart is of its own nature inclined to evil, and that continually. One summons of the adversary, and he draws an army "the number of whom is as the sand of the sea." But, thanks be to God, that the Lord takes now himself the lead of his cause against the rebels, for "fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them. And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night forever and ever." There we leave Satan, and turn to our fellow-men. For them the great moment is at hand. The world vanishes; everyone, living or dead, is called before the throne. God's memory is as infallible as if the facts of each man's life had been written in a book and laid before him. And they were judged, every man, "according to their works." *Dies iræ, dies illa!* And, consequently, since there remains no more chance to sin, the penalty of sin, death, becomes of no avail and is cast into the lake of fire also. But this is not the last impression God desires to leave in the mind of his Church. A refreshing scene of heaven—not the terrors of hell—greet our wondering eyes. We need not attempt to picture it here, the record is open to all.

One word in conclusion. Can you wonder that after such a matchless revelation of the truth of final victory, St. John bursts out in one of the most sublime invitations to join the advancing army? What matters pain? What matters banishment? What matters martyrdom, in view of the palm and the robe and the crown? Listen: "And the Spirit and the bride say, Come. And let him that heareth say, Come. And let him that is athirst come. And whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely."

Is there no connection and no comfort in this book?





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